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SUBJECT: LOWER MEKONG INITIATIVE: FORECAST MEKONG IN THE DELTA

REF: A) BANGKOK 3117 B) PHNOM PENH 747 C) SECRETARY 14 D) HCMC 665

¶1. (U) Summary: One practical byproduct of the Secretary's Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) is the U.S. Geological Survey's (USGS) effort to help the Mekong countries assess how climate change and human activities impact the Mekong basin. USGS held a Forecast Mekong workshop in Can Tho city December 8-12 for regional scientists and officials. Despite impressive environmental modeling by local scientists of some aspects of issues facing the Mekong basin, the workshop highlighted the ongoing need for better data integration and coordination -- something that USGS provides -- especially because some government researchers and academics face difficulties with releasing data. Chinese participation proved invaluable for integrating upper and lower Mekong water-management issues, especially as hydropower and food security emerged as dominant issues. Participants will now submit detailed proposals for research gaps and data integration needs. End Summary.

SCIENCE WORKSHOP IN THE DELTA

¶2. (U) The Delta Research and Global Observation Network (DRAGON) Institute-Mekong at Can Tho University is located at an important urban crossroads in Vietnam's Mekong delta. On December 9-12 DRAGON hosted a conference attended by more than 75 participants, including Vietnamese provincial and lower Mekong government officials, NGOs, scientists from the University Network for Wetland Research and Training in the Mekong region, regional State Department and Consulate Ho Chi Minh representatives and USGS scientists and program managers. The workshop's goal was for scientists from Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam to identify top research priorities, data integration needs and information gaps in the Mekong basin. A government wetlands institute administrator/scientist from China's Yunnan province also attended.

PRIORITIES: MODELING RICE, FISH, FLOODS, INFRASTRUCTURE

¶3. (U) Country presentations focused on water quality and sedimentation, hydropower, climate-change adaptation, and fisheries productivity. Laos stressed economic development needs, which meant hydropower dams; Laos could build as many as 60 dams on the mainstream or tributaries. Cambodia noted concerns over effects from planned Laotian dams but asserted that Cambodian dams would be on distant tributaries with less downstream impact. The Vietnamese presenter (from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment) stated that Vietnam opposed upriver mainstream dams; other Vietnamese scientists echoed his assertion of negative downstream effects. Both Thailand and Vietnam (the two largest rice exporters in the world) noted the vulnerability of their rice crops to changing weather patterns caused by climate change. For the Thai presenter, plans to divert river flow by upstream countries means that for the first time on the Mekong, large amounts of water for irrigating dry season rice could become a "game changer" in trans-boundary issues. Several participants listed water quality as a looming issue due to impacts from agriculture, chemical runoffs, and deforestation. All agreed that climate change could damage agriculture and fisheries productivity, especially through sea-level rise and acidification and through salinization of delta rice paddies.

WHAT WE SAW, WHAT THEY WANT, WHAT THE U.S. CAN OFFER

¶4. (U) We noted several areas of possible USGS collaboration with Mekong region scientists. Although substantial data collection and sophisticated modeling within the Mekong countries already exists, the USGS Forecast Mekong initiative can provide needed satellite data and data integration. Given the physical similarities between the Mississippi River and the Mekong, the U.S. can provide lessons learned from Mississippi management history, particularly in areas of dams, channelization and sedimentation. That local presenters displayed solid science but a lack of ability to integrate data for decision makers provides an opportunity for U.S. experts to work with local partners to integrate technical information and policy decision-making.

Field trips: Pesticides and Fish Feces

¶5. (U) A visit to local rice fields showed over 90 rice strains in use, but also indicated a lack of preparation for climate-change-related threats such as salinization and new invasive alien species. A visit to various "cage" (in-river) fish farms dramatized the huge amount of unregulated fish waste being dumped into regional waterways and how such industrial agricultural pollution can combine with the effects from climate change and hydropower development to threaten local livelihoods.

CHINA AND THE UPPER MEKONG

¶6. (SBU) Dr. Kun Tian, ecology professor at the Chinese

Southwest Forestry Center (SFWC), gave a presentation on water management in the Chinese section of the Mekong. His presentation showed high fish counts, biodiversity and the same conflicts over sustainable development that is occurring in the lower Mekong. The central government had taken over several key water-quality sites to employ conflict-management systems that had improved water quality in critical area. There appeared to be a lack, however, of holistic assessment systems for the existing or planned mainstream dams. Tian explained that China was taking greater account of environmental impact assessments and scientific data in making decisions on whether to build hydropower dams. Tian described the extensive scientific studies of water management, but also noted the many data gaps. Tian said there was a keen appetite among Yunnan scientists and water managers for scientific exchange among the U.S., Yunnan and the lower Mekong countries. Many of the challenges were the same: the adverse effects of channelizing and damming the river, managing forests in private hands, and water pollution.

OBSTACLES TO REGIONAL SCIENCE DATA SHARING

¶7. (SBU) Participants identified challenges to establishing DRAGON as a central data clearinghouse for researchers working on Mekong issues. Since the first DRAGON conference nearly a year ago (Ref B), local scientists have largely failed to contribute data to USGS. In Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, government control of the universities made permission to share data problematic. For Thailand, government restrictions are not the problem, but scientists face some of the same incentives that U.S. scientists have in not wanting to give up data without compensation. Yet it was evident that scientists wanted to share data and benefit from USGS data integration. (COMMENT: One solution might be to use the University Wetlands Network of 17 lower Mekong universities as a springboard for data integration

with a joint research or funding of its annual wetlands training course in return for data release to USGS. USGS has supported the wetlands network in the past, and an ESTH small grant supported the course last year. End Comment.) Another solution would be to use ESTH officers to explain to host governments the Forecast Mekong program and seek facilitation in release of university data. USGS will dub its visualization DVD into the four lower Mekong languages to facilitate government interest in Forecast Mekong.

NEXT STEPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS BEYOND DRAGON

¶8. (SBU) The Can Tho workshop provided a good foundation for future Forecast Mekong activities and laid the groundwork for strengthened relationships with Mekong region scientists and organizations. Participants will now develop detailed proposals for USGS collaboration in the next weeks. With help from embassy ESTH officers, USGS will coordinate with others who have or plan data integration programs to find synergies and avoid duplication, including the Asian Development Bank's Greater Mekong Subregion program, World Bank, Worldfish and the government aid organizations of Finland, Australia and Germany. Some, such as NGO Worldfish, have a mandate to share data; others may have a more proprietary approach. Forecast Mekong will endeavor to coordinate with the Mekong River Commission for both data sharing and to feed into MRC assessment efforts. Forecast Mekong should be able to add value to the MRC's strategic hydropower assessment, knowledge sharing platform and integrated basin management programs. Interaction with USAID's Famine and Early Warning Systems Network (FEWSNET), in which USGS has participated, would be useful to build on FEWSNET's work on water management and its impact on agricultural

productivity.

¶9. (SBU) The workshop brought out keen interest in exchanges between U.S. and Mekong scientists. Posts could contribute to Forecast Mekong through State Department programs such as international visitor and speaker and embassy science fellows. USGS will explore seconding a scientist to the MRC or the DRAGON institute. Seconding of a U.S. Fish and Wildlife service scientist would be helpful as well for fish migration studies. Study visits to the U.S. would be particularly helpful in the following areas: the Mississippi delta to visit river infrastructure and rice agriculture; U.S. Army Corps of Engineer projects in new fish passage technology on the Snake River; sediment monitoring projects; and upstream infrastructure sites such as the Missouri river.

COMMENT

¶10. (SBU) Although USGS realizes that ESF programming does not extend to China or Burma, DRAGON is providing a useful mechanism to bring Chinese scientists into dialogue with the Lower Mekong scientists and managers. The Mekong River Commission (MRC) is making strides in this area also (Ref A). With Forecast Mekong mingling the scientists and the MRC with officials, there is a good opportunity to integrate data and science along the entire length of the Mekong. The workshop showed much good science underway, but the scientific efforts are isolated from each other, making clear the need for USGS expertise in data integration and modeling to create decision-making tools. As with many areas of development, there is the danger of duplication both within the USG and among other donors. The workshop also showed the need for USGS expertise, and Forecast Mekong will use the coming weeks to coordinate with other donors

and to respond to the research gaps and begin data integration. End Comment.

¶11. (U) This cable was coordinated with US Embassy Bangkok and US Embassy Hanoi.
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